

We claim:-

1. A process for the production of a semifinished leather product from an animal hide by pretanning with a chromium-free tanning agent, wherein pretanning is effected with the additional use of a clay mineral which, after stirring for 30 minutes in water at 50°C at a circumferential rotor speed of from 5 to 25 m/s, has a number average particle diameter of less than 2 μm or a bimodal size distribution with a first, finely divided fraction whose number average particle diameter is less than 0.5 μm and a second, coarser fraction whose number average particle diameter is less than 5 μm , in each case determined by the method according to ISO 13320-1, by combined laser light diffraction and light scattering, the proportion of the first, finely divided fraction being from 10 to 90% by weight, and wherein the pretanned animal hide is dried to a water content of from 5 to 45%, based on the total weight of the semifinished leather product.
2. A process as claimed in claim 1, wherein the chromium-free tanning agent for the pretanning is selected from the following list: aldehyde tanning agents, in particular glutaraldehyde, isocyanates, aluminum salts, oxazolidines and tetrakis(hydroxymethyl)phosphonium chloride.
3. A process as claimed in claim 1 or 2, wherein the pretanned animal hide is dried to a water content of from 15 to 35%, based on the total weight of the semifinished leather product.
4. A process as claimed in any of claims 1 to 3, wherein a clay mineral having a number average particle diameter of less than 1 μm is used.
5. A process as claimed in any of claims 1 to 4, wherein substances which, owing to their chemical structure, are capable of forming strong hydrogen bonds with the clay mineral, in particular urea or urea derivatives, alcohols, polyols, propylene carbonate, organic amides, urethanes, saccharides or derivatives of saccharides, in particular nitrocellulose, sulfide cellulose or ethylhexylcellulose, are added to the clay mineral before or during the use thereof in the pretanning.
6. A process as claimed in any of claims 1 to 5, wherein the clay mineral is a

phyllosilicate.

7. A process as claimed in claim 6, wherein the phyllosilicate is a kaolinite, muscovite, montmorillonite, smectite, saponite, vermiculite, hallosite or bentonite, in particular a hectorite, or an organically modified variant thereof.
8. A process as claimed in any of claims 1 to 7, wherein drying is carried out at ambient temperature and ambient pressure, under reduced pressure and/or at elevated temperatures, preferably by drying on a tenter frame.
9. A process as claimed in any of claims 1 to 8, which comprises the further process step where the semifinished leather product is moistened with an aqueous solution of a tanning assistant which is absorbed into the semifinished leather product by means of physical forces, in particular osmosis, preferably with an aqueous solution of a protein hydrolysis product.
10. A process as claimed in any of claims 1 to 9, which comprises the further processing step where the dried semifinished leather product is resoftened by treatment with water or with an aqueous solution or suspension of a tanning assistant, for example of an amphoteric or cationic polymer, preferably by spraying, to a water content of from 50 to 80%, based on the total weight of the semifinished leather product.